

## mistletoe hung where you can see by jellyfishes

**Category:** Stranger Things (TV 2016)

**Genre:** Christmas, Coming Out, Fluff, High School, M/M, POV Outsider

**Language:** English

**Characters:** Jonathan Byers, Joyce Byers, Mike Wheeler, Will Byers

**Relationships:** Will Byers/Mike Wheeler

**Status:** Completed

**Published:** 2017-12-02

**Updated:** 2017-12-02

**Packaged:** 2022-04-03 05:08:14

**Rating:** General Audiences

**Warnings:** No Archive Warnings Apply

**Chapters:** 1

**Words:** 2,759

**Publisher:** archiveofourown.org

**Summary:**

It's almost Christmas, and they've all made it through another year without incident. Joyce is just starting to relax again when she notices a change in Will.

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### Author's Note:

It's never specified, but this is set around the kids' freshman year. Also, it pained me to not write Jopper into this, but it would have been too complicated, sadly.

Thanks for the idea, anon! I hope you enjoy :) x

Every year is the same. In the weeks leading up to Halloween, all through Thanksgiving, Joyce keeps a close eye on Will. After everything that has happened, she trusts him to tell her if something was wrong, but she can't help worrying anyway.

Around the time when Christmas decorations start going up around town, and the store starts filling with Christmas shoppers, Joyce begins to relax. Another year, and Will is *okay*. No episodes, no monsters, no Upside Down. He's safe.

They're all still finding ways to cope with the past, though. Sometimes Joyce wakes up, overcome with fear that Will has disappeared again. She has to stand in Will's doorway and watch him breathe for a while before her heart eventually stops racing and she can go back to sleep. She knows that her own pain can't compare to Will's in any way, and that's what scares her the most—her boy is strong, but he's sensitive, too. He didn't have it easy before all this happened, and he certainly doesn't have it easy now. Joyce does all she can to remind him that he's safe and that she loves him, that they all love him, but there will always be days when Will shuts himself in his room for hours, hiding under the covers of his bed.

As time goes on, these instances become less and less frequent, but they'll never truly go away.

But then, something peculiar starts to happen.

Joyce comes home from work late one night. In the run up to Christmas, she hardly ever gets to clock out when her shift is officially set to end. It's dark out, the rumblings of thunder beginning

in the distance. Winter thunderstorms aren't impossible, but they're usually not this loud. Will has never liked thunderstorms, but now that every sudden noise makes him jump, thunderstorms are a source of great anxiety for him. Jonathan is with him, but Joyce would feel much better if she was there, too. As soon as she's able to, Joyce gets in her car and speeds home.

Only, when she pulls open the front door, expecting to hear Jonathan consoling Will, or maybe their music blasting louder than the thunder, she hears laughter. When she fully enters the room, she finds Jonathan asleep on the couch. There's someone else here. Joyce's eyebrows knit together as she tiptoes through the hallway.

"Stop, stop—" Will cuts off into another round of giggles. "Stop, Mike!"

Will's door is cracked open, light spilling into the dark hall. She peers in, and sees Mike attacking Will with tickles, huge, identical grins on their faces. Thunder rolls in the background, but Will doesn't notice—or if he does, he doesn't seem to care. He bats Mike's hands away. "*Stoop*," he squeals, long and drawn out. "It's not fair!"

"What's not fair?" Mike says, shrieking when Will retaliates by shoving Mike and tickling his neck.

"Fine! Truce! Truce!" Mike cries, and Will backs off. They're both breathless, dissolving into giggles if they look at each other too long.

Joyce brings a hand up to her face, pressing her smile into it. She takes a few steps back, and then loudly walks towards the door again. She knocks, waiting to hear them yell, "Come in!" before she pushes it open.

"Hi, honey," she says to Will, and then says, "Hey, Mike. I didn't know you'd be over tonight."

Mike smiles at her sheepishly. "I was only supposed to be here for a few hours, but it's supposed to storm, and I just have my bike."

"I can give you a ride, if you need one?" Joyce offers, though she's reluctant to let him go, when he's doing such a good job of calming

Will down—or, rather, riling him up enough to forget the storm outside.

“It’s okay, Mom,” Will says. “We already called Mrs. Wheeler, she said it’s okay if he stays over.”

“Alright then,” Joyce nods, and then turns to leave. “Lights out in an hour, okay? It’s still a school night.”

As she heads back to the living room, to wake Jonathan up and steer him towards his own bed, so he won’t sleep on his back wrong, she realizes that she’s never seen that look on Will’s face before. It’s an entirely different emotion. Happiness, yes, and joy, and humor, but something else, too. Something she can’t place. She pushes it to the back of her mind, simply happy that Will is doing alright.

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Now that Will is in high school, Jonathan is in charge of getting Will home safe after school, so that Joyce can pick up more hours at work. She wants to save up enough for a new house, so that maybe they can escape the memories of everything that’s happened here a little bit faster.

So when Joyce returns home from work one day to find Jonathan and no Will, she thinks it’s reasonable for her to panic.

“Where’s Will?” she asks urgently.

Jonathan has his massive headphones on, so she has to repeat herself once he takes them off. “He’s at Mike’s,” Jonathan says after he hears her. “I’m picking him up at seven.”

“Oh,” Joyce says, nodding. “Thanks. I can pick him up, if you want?”

“I don’t mind,” Jonathan says. “But sure, okay.”

Joyce busies herself making dinner, sure that Will has already eaten at the Wheeler’s. As she and Jonathan eat their canned corn and hot dogs, all they have left in the house, she asks, “Has he been spending more time with Mike than normal?”

Jonathan looks up, shrugging. "I don't know. I guess. He's his best friend."

"No, I know, I mean," Joyce shakes her head. "It's not a bad thing, I was just wondering."

They eat in silence for a while, until Jonathan says, "You're right, though. They haven't gone a day without seeing each other since, like, last year."

Joyce thinks about it, and then nods. "Yeah. It's nice to see him happy again."

Soon enough, it's six o'clock. Joyce makes the short drive over to the Wheeler's. Karen opens the door, and they make pleasant conversation for a few minutes, before Karen yells in the direction of the basement, "Boys! Time to wrap it up!"

Joyce can hear their laughter drifting up the steps, and smiles. When they round into view, something looks different about Will, but she can't place it. Mostly, he just looks *happy*.

"Bye, Will," Mike says when they reach the front door.

Will hesitates, and then hugs Mike. Joyce glances at Karen over the two boys, both of them raising their eyebrows in confusion. "Bye, Mike," Will says, pulling away slowly.

Karen and Joyce share one last glance before they shut the door, Joyce and Will heading towards the car. When they're both buckled up and moving, Joyce realizes what's different—Will changed his clothes. He's still wearing his jeans, the only jeans he has, but the striped top he was wearing before school has been replaced by a cozy, knitted sweater, patterned with red reindeer and blue snowflakes. It's too big for him, clearly; he keeps pulling the sleeves up so they won't hang over his fingers, and the neckline is tilted to the side, slouching almost entirely over Will's left shoulder. Joyce has never seen him wear it before.

"That's a nice sweater," she says casually.

Will looks down, as if he forgot he was wearing it. "Oh, yeah. Um. I

spilled something on my shirt so Mike let me borrow me this.”

Joyce nods. “Give me the shirt when we get home so I can wash the stain out.”

Will coughs uncomfortably, and stutters when he says, “That’s okay, uh, Mrs. Wheeler already washed it. I forgot it at their house, I think.”

It wouldn’t have been odd if Will didn’t seem so *guilty* .

“Oh, okay,” Joyce says, trying not to sound curious. She doesn’t buy Will’s story for a minute, but she can’t for the life of her figure out why he would need to lie about something as simple as a stained shirt.

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The next day, when Mike comes over to the Byers’, he’s wearing a striped shirt that is far too small for him. He’s pushed the sleeves up so they look like they’re meant to be short, but he can’t hide the fact that it’s too tight around the middle and keeps riding up at the bottom.

Joyce stares at it for a long time before deciding that it’s definitely Will’s shirt.

“Huh,” she says to herself, and then pushes it to the back of her mind.

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“Will, honey, can we talk?”

Will’s head shoots up, his eyes wide.

“You’re not in trouble,” Joyce says. She shifts the laundry basket on her hip. “I wanted to ask if there’s something wrong with your clothes? I know I haven’t bought you anything new in awhile, I just thought you liked what you had.”

“What?” Will asks. “I do like my clothes.”

Joyce sets the basket down in front of her, digging through it. She counts out one, two, three, four new tops since last week. They're all too big, and they're all from brands that Joyce would had to save up for ages to afford. "Then why are you trading all your clothes with Mike?"

Will's face goes red and he stammers, "I'm not. I just—I don't know how that happened. I'll give them back, sorry."

He takes the shirts out of Joyce's hands and puts them in a corner in his room.

"Will," Joyce says quietly.

"Sorry, Mom," Will says again, even though there's nothing to be sorry for. She wants to tell him that, but it's clear that he wants her to go now.

Like usual, she leaves more confused than she entered.

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Joyce doesn't see Will wear another too-big sweater for a while, after that. She wishes that she'd never said anything, because now he seems subdued, not the same cheerful boy she's seen him be for the past few months.

And then one day, when she's had a nightmare and needs to see Will, she notices that he's wearing one. It's a new one, a dark navy blue with speckles of white woven into the knit pattern. It's practically hanging off of him.

For as busy as Joyce is, she thinks she's an observant person. She knows when there's something wrong with one of her boys, and she knows what they want without them having to ask, and she almost always knows why they feel the way they feel. This time, she doesn't know why Will has reverted back to the person he was months ago, and she doesn't know why he's wearing Mike's sweater, and she definitely doesn't know how those two things are connected—she just knows they are.

She sneaks back out Will's room, leaning against the wall and

attempting to collect her thoughts.

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When *it* happens, Joyce cannot believe she didn't guess it sooner.

She had found another bucket of Christmas decorations in the shed, and is now stringing lights up around the house. Halfway through, she decides they bring back too many memories, and takes them down again. Instead, she hangs tinsel. At the bottom of the container is a mistletoe made of plastic. She rolls her eyes, but decides to hang it anyway. She won't be getting kissed under it anytime soon, but it doesn't hurt to dream. She hangs it in the center of the hallway, and then takes the empty bucket back into the shed.

As she's coming inside again, she hears Mike and Will's voices. They've been in Will's room for a few hours, but they must be emerging due to the smell of cinnamon rolls in the oven. She wanted to do something special for Will, since he's been so down lately.

Joyce doesn't *mean* to spy on them, but she's standing *right there* , and they haven't seen her yet.

They're standing near the end of the hallway, a little ways back from the mistletoe.

"Want to?" Mike asks, and Will giggles.

Joyce is about to walk away, when suddenly Will surges forward and presses his lips to Mike's. It only lasts a second, and then they're pulling away to smile at each other.

At first, Joyce thinks, *well, that makes sense* . And then she thinks, *wait, what?*

But now they see her, and she still hasn't decided how she should react to this. It's not that she minds that Will is kissing boys, it's more that he felt like he couldn't tell her about it. And it's clear that this isn't Will and Mike's first kiss, so who knows how long they've been hiding this from her. Has she done something to make him think she wouldn't approve? Lonnie used to call Will horrible things, but Joyce always made sure that Will knew she didn't agree with them. At



least, she thought she made sure.

“Mom?” Will says, his voice breaking. She sees Mike start to put his arm around Will’s shoulders, and then stop halfway through.

“I’m sorry,” she chokes out, and then realizes that Will is wearing another one of Mike’s sweaters. She can’t help but laugh at herself for not figuring it out sooner. She takes a step forward, and her heart breaks when she sees Will’s eyes water. “Listen, baby, I—I don’t care. I just want you to be happy.”

The corners of Will’s lips turn up and he wipes his eyes. Even Mike seems to be holding back tears.

“Hey, come ‘ere,” Joyce says, and gathers them both in a crushing hug. She pulls them both close, resting their heads on her shoulders. “Mike, you know you’ve always been my favorite.”

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“How long?” she asks. She had lead them into the kitchen so she could dish out the cinnamon rolls, and now they’re both seated in front of her, awkwardly fidgeting with their forks.

“I don’t know,” Will says, with the face of someone who definitely does know. “Like, um, a few months?”

At the same time, Mike says, “Since February.”

Will cringes, looking over at Mike.

“February?” Joyce repeats. “You didn’t think you could tell me?”

“No, it’s not that—” Will says, sighing. “I just. I didn’t want anyone to act differently around me. I already get treated like I’m, like I’m fragile, and I didn’t want to be the *queer* on top of it.”

“Hey,” Mike and Joyce say in unison.

If Joyce needed any proof that Mike is good for Will, she’d have it now, as Mike reaches over and holds Will’s hand. Will’s face immediately relaxes.

“You’re my boy,” Joyce says earnestly. “I love you no matter what. And I’m not treating you any differently, okay? I promise.”

Will smiles at his plate, taking another bite of his dessert. “Okay.”

“What’s with the sweaters, though?” Joyce gestures between them with her fork. She sees, now, that not only is Will wearing Mike’s clothes, but Mike is wearing Will’s too.

They blush, Mike’s freckles disappearing under the rosy hue. It’s Mike who answers, this time. “It helps me sleep, when, you know, when I’m wearing something that smells like him.”

“Me too,” Will manages to say, avoiding Joyce’s eyes.

“Alright,” she keeps her face neutral, nodding, and then winks at Mike. “Well, maybe we can buy Will some bigger sweaters so when he gives them to you, they’ll fit a little better.”

“You mean I’m not pulling this off?” Mike jokes, stretching his arms out and watching the sleeves of Will’s sweater bunch up almost near his elbows.

Will quietly pushes his own sleeves up, after they fall over his hands again. When he notices Joyce watching him, he blushes again. Joyce simply smiles into another bite of cinnamon roll.

Will will have to deal with the memories of his past for the rest of his life. He’s getting better, and he’ll continue to get better, but he’ll never be the same as he was before. And maybe it’s best, Joyce thinks, that the person he’s with has been through much of the same experiences as Will.

Joyce doesn’t need to worry about Will so much anymore, if he’s got Mike. She’s seen how fiercely Mike protects him, how loyal he is, and how he would put himself in harm’s way to save his friends. She trusts him. She can’t think of a single person on the planet who deserves Will as much as Mike does.

And as long as Will is happy, so is Joyce.

**Author’s Note:**

Thank you so much for reading!! :)

You can also find me at my [stranger things blog](#),  
where I'm taking prompts!